

E. Harris Harbison

Religious Perspectives
of College Teaching
in History

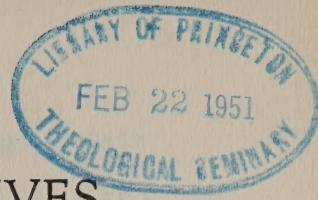
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PREFACE TO THE SERIES OF ESSAYS

Three years ago Professor George F. Thomas of Princeton University, in a letter to The Edward W. Hazen Foundation, urged the need for careful studies by natural scientists, social scientists, and humanistic scholars concerning the religious issues, implications and responsibilities involved in the teaching of their respective disciplines. This pamphlet is part of a series instituted by The Edward W. Hazen Foundation for the purpose of carrying Professor Thomas' suggestion into the sphere of fruitful inquiry and discussion. Under the sponsorship of The Foundation, the undersigned committee has enlisted the aid of distinguished scholars deeply interested in the relations between religion and higher education. Each of these scholars will discuss the problem in its specific pertinence to his own field of learning, his own conception of his intellectual and spiritual responsibilities to his students, to the institution which he serves, and to society in general. He will address himself primarily to fellow-teachers in his field, secondarily to students and to interested members of the educated public.

The committee responsible for the survey wishes to steer a course between two opposite dangers: that of a theological vagueness which would produce nothing but noncommittal generalities, and that of a dogmatism which would alienate all but a small number of readers. The views of the authors of these essays may vary from liberal to orthodox interpretations of religion. Throughout this diversity, however, runs a common denominator which is shared by the authors and by the members of the committee. Religion is not nature-worship, or man-worship, or science-worship. It is not the totality of human value. Although it is metaphysical, ethical, and humanitarian, it cannot be equated with metaphysics, or ethics, or humanitarianism. Religion is man's quest for communion with an ultimate spiritual reality completely independent of human desires and imaginings. Religion apprehends this Absolute Reality and Value in faith, and seeks to give concrete embodiment to the ineffable in creed, cult, and conduct. The creative power of the universe is not an intellectual abstraction but an objective entity, a Divine Being. Although God infinitely transcends our human nature and understanding, He most potently reveals Himself to those who conceive of Him in personal terms. Thus symbolized, He becomes

for us not merely Cosmic Mind, but Creator, Judge and Redeemer of mankind.

Within this broad but positive consensus the authors of these essays will exercise complete freedom in expressing their personal views. As regards the relevance of religion for higher education there is also general agreement among those associated with this survey. The cleavage which divides intellectual from spiritual life is probably the most ominous defect of modern civilization. "High religion and intellectual enterprise belong together," says Professor Robert L. Calhoun. "Each gains from close association with the other. The two in conjunction, but neither one by itself, can move with hope toward more effective conquest of the chaos that again and again threatens to engulf human living. That way lies whatever chance we may have for a more humane world."

In his essay *Colleges, Faculties and Religion*, appraising consultations with more than fifty faculties, Professor Albert C. Outler reports that "Education is by way of being reformed with little or no regard for the possible contribution of religion to its reformation. For a very tangled skein of reasons, it has come to pass that, in the name of tolerance and the democratic spirit, American educators (whatever their private beliefs and convictions) have in fact suppressed the consideration of the problems of the religious interpretation of reality and human existence in the educational process." He sees, however, evidence that religion will become increasingly influential in American higher education if it can receive "a fair hearing in the open forum of American academic discussion Where this is done, there is usually a vigorous and generally favorable reaction from both faculty and students."

To obtain such a "fair hearing" from a large academic audience is the purpose of these essays. Even in these days of "general education," however, the modern scholar remains a specialist. He is likely to be less interested in the general problem of the place of religion in higher education than in the specific problem of how religion pertains to the teaching of his particular subject. This more specialized aspect of the question deserves more careful investigation than it has hitherto received. At present, therefore, these essays are being published as separate pamphlets so that each may appeal directly to those concerned with the discipline which it discusses.

It is hoped, however, that the project may prove fruitful enough to justify later publication in a single volume or perhaps in three shorter books devoted respectively to the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities.

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RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES IN HISTORY

E. HARRIS HARBISON

I

A theologian who had written an eloquent history of the Reformation is said to have met the historian Ranke in Berlin and embraced him effusively as one would a confrere. "Ah please," said the father of scientific history, drawing himself away, "there is a great difference between us: you are first of all a Christian, and I am first of all a historian."

It was with this anecdote that Lord Acton introduced the central argument of his inaugural lecture on "The Study of History".¹ The story dramatizes vividly the nineteenth century belief that history is a "science", and that science is knowledge of an utterly different order from religion. The "great difference" which Ranke saw between Christian and historian has undoubtedly narrowed in our own day as historians have grown more conscious of the subjectivity of their interpretation and more uneasy about calling history a "science". But a difference still exists in the academic mind between one who would call himself "first of all a Christian" and one who would call himself "first of all a historian."

Many years ago men would have looked at the same difference from the other side of the gulf. Imagine Acton's anecdote in reverse: Ranke (in a previous incarnation) enthusiastically embraces a great medieval saint, let us say Bernard, as a comrade; but the saint draws himself away saying, "You are a chronicler of the City of Man, I am a citizen of the City of God; between us there is a great gulf fixed." The point is simply that in the middle ages the tables would have been turned. Sainthood once had the prestige which science (and "scientific" history) was to attain in the nineteenth century. St. Bernard, in the position in which we have imagined him, would have sensed the danger in Ranke's desire to clothe his secular scholarship with the aura of Christian sanctity. "You are first of all a historian," he might conclude, "I am first of all a Christian."

In letting the imagination play upon the apparent difference between professing Christian and professional historian, however,

it is easy to oversimplify. We know, for instance, that Ranke himself was a deeply religious person. "In all history," he wrote at one time, "God dwells, lives, is to be seen. Every deed demonstrates Him, every moment preaches His name."² I can find little information about the effusive theologian in the story, but I am sure that if Ranke thought his history of the Reformation a bad job, it *was* a bad job. Assuming that what Ranke objected to was the distortion of events "as they actually happened" to fit the demands of sectarian prejudice, the cause of Christian truth certainly did not suffer through his rebuke. The eager quest from Bayle to Voltaire to cleanse the historical record of superstition and priestly distortion, the passion for accuracy, objectivity, and exhaustiveness in the nineteenth century German school of "scientific" historiography—these things were certainly not anti-Christian in and of themselves. It is far too simple to say that in our anecdote Ranke represents something called "history" and the theologian something called "Christianity." Each in a different sense was a *Christian historian*. The question as Ranke stated it was which comes "first of all," a man's vocation as Christian or his profession as historian.

II

There is a false sharpness in this apparent contradiction between "Christian" and "historian" which results from the survival of a naïve nineteenth-century conception of "objectivity." Deep at the heart of the American academic world is the belief that the word "scholar" cannot tolerate any qualifying adjective like "Christian." Has not the scholar had to battle the priest at every step of the way in his fight for freedom of inquiry? Did not the Church burn Bruno and humiliate Galileo? And in the search for historical truth, were not the real heroes those who (like Valla) exposed the arrogant forgeries of Popes or (like Bayle) laid bare the superstitions on which Christians had been nourished for centuries? Once a man allows himself to be *anything* before he is "scholar" or "scientist," so the argument runs, truth flies out the window and prejudice fills the classroom. The adjectives most feared today are of course not religious, but pseudo-religious—not "Christian" and "Jewish" but "Communist" and "Fascist." Fascist, Nazi, and Bolshevik regimes have attacked the disinterested pursuit of truth

for its own sake as not only dangerous but fundamentally immoral, and it is no wonder that older convictions about the incompatibility of science and religion should be reinforced by the present-day evidence that disinterested scholarship cannot survive under the shadow of our great pseudo-religions. Such convictions are particularly strong among historians because they know what happens to the historical profession and the historical record in the hands of totalitarian governments. In any discussion of the hackneyed problem of "academic objectivity" it is important to remember that American academic communities are keenly aware of the overwhelming threat to the disinterested pursuit of truth which has driven a throng of scholarly exiles to our shores and onto our campuses. The jealous fear of coupling any adjective implying zealous faith with "scholar" is not altogether unjustified.

This was borne in upon me vividly at Bossey near Geneva during the summer of 1949, at a conference of professional historians and graduate students on "The Meaning of History." Years of totalitarian tyranny or war regimentation on the Continent have sapped any vitality which might have been left in the nineteenth-century belief in "objectivity." Historians who lived under "thought control" learned to use "objectivity" as an escape from publicly committing themselves to the dominant political philosophy. Today their students have only contempt for the tendency they notice in the older academic generation to avoid commitment of any kind, on or off the lecture platform. On the other hand, they warm to teachers who believe something, even though it be a communism which most of them would reject. To most of them "objectivity" is either a hypocritical dodge designed to cover up unspoken assumptions or an immoral escape from the necessity of taking a stand on the vital issues of the day. Many European historians are so saturated in existential thinking as to deny the possibility of objectivity in any sense of the word. The only attainable objectivity, one member of the conference argued, is a frank and detailed confession of all subjective prejudices in the preface of a historical work. In other words, the dominant opinion in many European academic communities appears to be the opposite of the dominant American opinion. You must proclaim openly what sort of a historian you are—Communist, Bourgeois, or Christian. Words like "scholar" and "historian" must always and

inevitably have qualifying adjectives attached to them or they have no meaning.

Contact with such thinking has a dual effect upon an American. On the one hand, it gives him a sense of pride and gratitude that belief in the possibility of disinterested inquiry is still alive and vigorous in American universities. On the other hand, it makes him sensitive to the naïveté and hypocrisy in much American talk about impartial objectivity. There is a sense in which "impartiality" has become a luxury which only those nations can afford which remained neutral or happened to avoid the worst physical and moral destruction during the late war. Swedish students at the conference mentioned were insistent that they and their friends were not a bit interested in the personal beliefs of their professors but solely in what they *knew*. Any teacher of history this side of the water will remember the same disposition in many students he has known. Faith in the possibility of "objective" knowledge is evidently still strong in these two parts of the world at least. But to most Europeans, and even to many Americans, teachers and students alike, impartiality is simply a pose adopted by fearful academicians with de-sensitized social consciences and dried-up emotions. Even in the United States all of us who face students in the college classrooms have at one time or another sensed the utter seriousness with which undergraduates ask, "But what is *your* relation to what you know? What is *your* concern with it? What do *you* think it's all about?" This is not the place to spell out what has happened to the concept of "objectivity" in recent epistemology—and only a philosopher would do the job well. It is enough to point out that the contemporary teacher and writer of history is confronted in fact by an audience which includes an increasing number who think that Ranke was not necessarily any more "objective" than his theological friend. Europeans are simply a few steps ahead of Americans in popular awareness of the truth that the knower is intimately involved in the process of knowing.

III

The question which haunts any historian today who is at all sensitive to the deeper currents of the age in which he lives, the question his students constantly ask of him by implication even

when they do not put it into words, is the question of the meaning of history. A great many of the veterans who flocked into courses in history and the social studies in such swollen numbers after the war made it clear to advisers and teachers that they were looking for answers they thought neither the arts and letters nor the natural sciences could give. Somewhere in history, many of them thought, the answer to how it all came about was to be found. This search is still on on many campuses, at least so far as history courses are concerned. Students who would hardly think of asking "What is the meaning of nuclear energy?" or "What is the meaning of the artistic impulse?" will ask in one way or another "What is the meaning of human history?" What they really mean to ask, of course, is "Where are we all headed?"

Questions like this are not fashionable among professional historians, but when a man reaches the top of the profession and no longer has reason to fear the sneers of his colleagues, it is a well-established custom to reflect upon such matters. Kenneth Scott Latourette, delivering the presidential address before the American Historical Association in 1948 on "The Christian Understanding of History," pointed out that "a survey of the presidential addresses made before this Association reveals the fact that no one single topic has so attracted those who have been chosen to head this honorable body as have the possible patterns and meanings of history."³ In a recent discussion with a fellow historian Arnold J. Toynbee remarked, "This job of making sense of history is one of the crying needs of our day—I beg of you believe me."⁴ The philosophers and above all the theologians have been even more eager than the historians in recent years to make sense of history. Books on "The Meaning of History," "Meaning in History," "Faith and History," "Christianity and the Nature of History" have poured from the presses in fairly steady succession, particularly since the close of the war.⁵ The historian may perhaps be pardoned for thinking that this question of the whole meaning of his subject is pressed upon *him* more insistently these days by students and fellow scholars than it is upon any of his colleagues in other departments of higher learning.

There are two easy answers to this question of the meaning of history. One is to say that meaning is so woven into the texture of history that the pattern is self-evident to any interested and careful

observer. All that is necessary is to study the historical record "objectively" and impartially, and a design of meaningful progress will become evident. The other is to say that there is no meaning in history and that the search for design is futile and stupid. The first is an attitude of assurance which is closely affiliated to the nineteenth-century faith that if the facts are only heaped high enough they will amount to something. The second is an attitude of doubt which is generally born of disillusionment about the failure of exactly this kind of assurance.

It is not the purpose of this essay to present and preach a Christian "interpretation" of history. Rather it is to suggest that the question of meaning must be faced by every professional historian whether he likes it or not, both in his teaching and writing; that current secular answers generally end up either in a too-easy assurance or a too-abstract doubt; and that there is a Christian way of looking at history which is something less than a philosophy of history but something more than a mere frame of mind, which constitutes the only really adequate alternative to either dogmatism or scepticism.

The men of assurance in the historical profession are perhaps not so numerous as they once were, but they are still an impressive group. They are generally the "social scientists" among historians, the heirs of a great hope, that science will save society. The study of history has always had its statistical side and the areas of it which are capable of semi-scientific treatment have received increasing attention during the past two centuries: geography, climate, demography, production and exchange, class struggle and social displacement. Historical study has profited immensely from this statistical emphasis, and the hard-boiled statisticians who keep reminding their colleagues of prices and wages, food production and population fluctuation, "forces" and "trends", are stimulating and indispensable members of any department of history. But the perception of trends and the drawing of graphs appear to exercise a fatal fascination on the academic mind. The trends become animated, and before we know it we are confronted with mechanisms and determinisms which "explain" history. Any practising historian knows how deliciously seductive these magnificent simplicities can be to students who for the first time encounter the historical interpretation of Marx, for instance, or Spengler, or Sorokin.

If the men of assurance seize upon one of the emotional attitudes of modern science—its self-confidence and optimism—the men of doubt seize upon another—its tentative, sceptical, inquiring attitude, Descartes' *de omnibus dubitandum*. History to them is an unintelligible and meaningless process. Any meaning ascribed to the course of history is totally subjective; any determination of cause and effect is difficult and dubious; even the concept of cause itself, many of them maintain, is best dispensed with. There is an intellectual honesty about these people, a refusal to be taken in, an ascetic renunciation of wishful thinking which are altogether admirable. But in the classroom this second attitude too often ends in a philosophy which proclaims that life is a mess, history a farce, and historical study a kind of intellectual game, interesting in a gruesome sort of way, but not enlightening and certainly not ennobling. All this is particularly appealing to a bewildered, disillusioned, and fearful post-war generation of students. In times of trouble pessimism is a surer balm than optimism. Men can enjoy misery if they know they have company in it. I have often seen students gain real emotional release through the discovery that a professor of history was more cynical and despairing about the state of the universe than they were themselves. But the anodyne is not permanent. And although doubt may be the beginning of wisdom, I know of no guarantee that it must end in wisdom. It is hard to nourish vigorous and creative historical thinking on the thin gruel of thorough-going scepticism.

IV

It should be the mark of a Christian attitude toward history that it resolves the antinomy of assurance and doubt about the meaning of the historical process on a higher plane. St. Augustine was the first Christian thinker to wrestle long and hard with the problem of how the Christian must look upon history, and it was Augustine who first saw clearly that to the Christian history is *neither* a deterministic system *nor* a meaningless chaos. The determinists of his day believed that history moved in cycles and that if only historians studied the process of recurrence carefully enough they could describe and predict the movements of history almost as they could predict the motions of the planets. Origen had seen that if this were true, then

Adam and Eve will do once more exactly what they have already done; the same deluge will be repeated; the same Moses will bring the same six hundred thousand people out of Egypt; Judas will again betray his Lord; and Paul a second time will hold the coats of those who stone Stephen.

"God forbid that we should believe this," Augustine wrote, "for Christ died once for our sins, and rising again, dies no more."⁶ In other words, there is a decisiveness and unpredictability about history which is falsely annihilated in any view of history as mechanical recurrence, scientifically intelligible and predictable.

Augustine saw with equal clarity that history is not chaos. The rise and fall of states and civilizations is not meaningless process.

We do not attribute the power of giving kingdoms and empires to any save to the true God . . . He who is the true God . . . gave a kingdom to the Romans when He would, and as great as He would, as He did also to the Assyrians and even the Persians . . . And the same is true in respect of men as well as nations . . . He who gave power to Augustus gave it also to Nero . . . He who gave it to the Christian Constantine gave it also to the apostate Julian . . . Manifestly these things are ruled and governed by the one God according as He pleases; *and if His motives are hid, are they therefore unjust?*⁷

The very essence of a Christian understanding of history, despite the many sectarian forms it may take, is in this last sentence. The Hebrew Prophets and the Christian Fathers agreed in believing the strange paradox that God both *reveals* and *conceals* Himself in history. There is too much revelation for a Christian to think that there is no judgment or mercy in history, no moral meaning, no spiritual significance. On the other hand, the divine concealment is of such a character that no Christian may think that the judgment or meaning or significance is unambiguously clear to him as a human being. To Luther, who wrote eloquently about this "hiddenness of God" in history, there is mystery as well as majestic purpose in the historical pageant; and the one is meaningless without the other. God is Lord of history to Luther, but He does not work openly and visibly in the historical process. In typically extravagant imagery, he speaks of history as God's "play", God's "mummery," God's "joust and tourney". The actual course of

secular history cannot be identified with God's will—nor can it be wholly divorced from His will. God wills to conceal as well as to reveal Himself in the fate of empires, and above all in the unplumbed depths of two central events, the Birth and Passion of Christ. In a famous comparison of God's grace to a passing shower of rain, Luther suggested in a single brief passage the simultaneous revelation and concealment of the divine will, the unity-within-diversity of human history, the uniqueness of events, and the decisiveness of the present moment in history for the individual:

For this shall you know, that God's word and grace are a passing shower of rain, which never comes again where it has once been. It was with the Jews, but what is gone is gone, they have nothing now. Paul brought it into Grecian land. What is gone is gone again, now they have the Turks. Rome and Latin land had it also. What is gone is gone, they now have the Pope. And you Germans must not think that you will always have it. So grasp on and hold to, whoever can grasp and hold.⁸

V

In developing the implications of these basic Christian insights into history, Christian thinkers and Christian sects have not escaped the danger of falling into one or the other of precisely the same attitudes which we have described in the case of secular historians. We might say that in the Christian case these are the "heresies" of over-assurance and over-diffidence about the meaning of history, the one closely parallel to the sin of pride, the other to that of sloth.

To Christian historians the Biblical record has always appeared to reveal a broad pattern of the divine activity in history. A Swiss scholar, Oscar Cullmann, has recently sketched this pattern with brilliant strokes as he believes it to appear in the New Testament.⁹ As he sees it, the God who created the universe is the Lord of redemption and so of history. By the dual process of "calling" and "substitution," he directs the drama of salvation through its various stages to triumphant conclusion beyond the historical vision of mankind. He first calls or chooses mankind to stand for creation; then calls a nation, the Hebrews, to substitute for man in general; then summons a remnant to represent that nation when it falls away; and finally fixes upon one man, the Christ, to stand for all humanity and creation. The progressive reduction then gives way to progres-

sive expansion and the process reverses itself. Through Christ the apostles are won, through the apostles the Church is founded, through the Church all mankind will be reconciled to God, and the new heaven and earth will complete the first creation. The fact that the Western world divides time into "A.D." and "B.C." is the most obvious evidence of the incalculable influence which this broad pattern of meaning envisioned by the early Christians has had upon historical understanding.

The point at which this pattern becomes controversial for Christian groups is naturally the concrete meaning given to the age in which we live, the age of the Church from the Resurrection to the present. Is the gradual unfolding of this age a significant part of the drama or not? Is God's hand still evident in every turn of events? If so, how and where and in what?

The answer has been clearest through the ages for the Roman Christian. For him, God's hand has been clearly evident in history since Pentecost in the Roman Catholic Church. There is a real progress in history: progressive unfolding of doctrines which were only implicit in New Testament times, progressive winning of the pagan, the infidel, and the schismatic in spite of all appearances of defeat. History has a central thread in Church history, in the growth of a visible divine institution—what Sir Thomas More called "the common, known church"—changeless in goal but constantly changing in its temporal position in relation to this goal. In different times and in different ways, such a conviction that God's hand in history is unmistakably revealed in a visible historical institution has been shared by Eastern Orthodox Christians as well as by Lutherans, Anglicans, and early Calvinists. Its remote source is undoubtedly the Old Testament Covenant of Jehovah with his chosen people.

Another form taken by Christian assurance about the meaning of history is the belief that God's hand is evident not so much in *institutions* as in *events*. In the Middle Ages, the most significant events were visions and miracles. To readers of the lives of the saints, God's love and power were constantly breaking in upon the ordinary course of human affairs in a direct and self-evident way. The successor to this belief in more sophisticated early modern times was the conviction, particularly evident in Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan contemporaries, that God's hand appears not so much in miracle as in the outcome of historical events like battles. This conviction

that God guides men not by mystical vision or miraculous breaking of natural law but by his shaping of secular history, by what Cromwell called "dispensations," was rooted in the Hebrew prophets and widely prevalent among our seventeenth-century American ancestors.

Among Protestants today assurance about the meaning of history is certainly not a besetting sin. Christians have never entirely recovered from the eighteenth-century attack on the "theological interpretation" of history which had been dominant from Augustine to Bossuet. Nor should they, perhaps. Many of the things which Voltaire assailed in Christian historiography needed to be assailed: the narrow parochialism which funneled all ancient history into the story of "that miserable little people," the Jews; the neglect of non-Christian civilizations; the partisanship and axe-grinding so characteristic of monkish and priestly chronicle; the easy recourse to miracle as a short-circuit of causal explanation. Voltaire and his fellow-philosophers destroyed the older Christian pattern of meaning in history only to substitute another, that of secular progress. But the shattering experience of two world wars and the cold shadow of a third have effectually destroyed the naïve belief in inevitable progress, and most Protestant leaders today are concerned to extirpate the last traces of nineteenth-century optimism about the course of secular history.

The result is a strong tendency on the part of Christian intellectuals today to adopt a kind of Christian scepticism about the meaning of history. Among Protestant theologians this group is clearly in the ascendancy today, in terms of prestige if not also of numbers. There is sound historical reason for this. Primitive Protestantism had at its center a passionate protest against identifying the will of God with any visible institution such as the Roman Church. Too often the result was simply to substitute the church of Wittenberg, Geneva, or England for that of Rome. But it is impossible in the long run for a Protestant to rest content with any theory of history in which a visible institution is the sole channel of God's grace. This is why Protestants turned so easily to something like Cromwell's doctrine of "dispensations." They soon abused this doctrine, to be sure, by seeing God's will in secular events or movements which pleased them, all the way from parliamentary government and democracy to liberalism and socialism. Led by Karl Barth, Protestant theologians today are moving in strong reaction to such

tendencies. In spite of the widespread current interest in history among theologians, the deepest currents in Protestant theology, particularly in Europe, can only be described as *anti-historical*. These currents find their source in Kierkegaard, in Barth, in Berdyaev, and in secular philosophers of the existentialist school. Diverse as they are in their sources and present courses, they have some things in common: a deep distrust of everything associated with "progress"; a sense that God is the "wholly Other" and hence not to be identified with any historical institution or movement, whether it stem from Rome or Geneva or Moscow; a radical Christian relativism in viewing all historical achievements.

This Christian scepticism about the possibility of discerning any pattern of meaning in secular history bulks large in recent theological works. "There never has been and never will be," a recent writer concludes, "an immanent solution of the problem of history, for man's historical experience is one of steady failure . . . History is, through all the ages, a story of action and suffering, of power and pride, of sin and death . . . The importance of secular history decreases *in direct proportion* to the intensity of man's concern with God and himself . . . A 'Christian history' is non-sense."¹⁰ I have heard a similar view eloquently expressed by a deeply spiritual Danish professor of church history who was arguing "the impossibility of a Christian conception of history." Since real knowledge presupposes simultaneity, he maintained, we can never actually know the past and the past can never have real significance for us. The mere unrolling of history has no visible meaning for a converted Christian. "Christian belief," he concluded, "is to trust God in the uncertainty of life. It is the most abominable arrogance to make false certainties by interpreting history in a Christian way."¹¹ The trend toward a Christian agnosticism with respect to any self-evident meaning in the course of history is very strong indeed, particularly in Europe. Evidently the Christian historian does not avoid the twin dangers of dogmatism and doubt simply by being a Christian.

VI

The historian who happens also to be a Christian is thus besieged, as it were, by four attacking armies of colleagues, students, and friends who come at him from the four points of the compass. His secular colleagues who have all the answers tell him to put aside

childish things like religion now that he has become a man and to open his eyes to the great material mechanisms which determine history. A few of his Christian friends are perhaps equally dogmatic on the other side of the matter, exposing the naïve assumptions of the materialists and pointing out with equal assurance just where the hand of God is to be discerned in history. The agnostics among his colleagues both in history and in theology come at him from two different and opposite quarters—each with *Nescio* inscribed on their banners, but for quite different reasons. Each group maintains that history has nothing much to do with Christianity, the first because Christianity is nothing, the second because history is nothing. In this plight I think the Christian historian may well stand up and make a brief speech which might run something like this:

“I am neither a philosopher nor a theologian. I am interested as any educated man is in philosophy and theology, but as a professional historian you must not expect of me a fully-rounded philosophy or theology of history. Thanks to my training, I am suspicious of big words and big ideas. I believe that Marx was wrong in his interpretation of history for the same reason that the authors of saints’ legends were wrong— that human history cannot be reduced to magnificent simplicities, either material or spiritual. I have a feeling that agnosticism, not assurance, is the first step toward wisdom, provided that it does not sink away into cynicism and despair. But I cannot agree that history has nothing to do with the religious insights of Christianity, or that Christianity has nothing to do with secular history. I could not long remain either a believing Christian or a practising historian with my convictions about Christianity and history in water-tight compartments. I believe, in spite of secular sceptics, that Christianity offers a profound insight into the general nature of the historical process, even though both as historian and Christian I am too diffident to think that I can discern a clear-cut pattern. I believe, in spite of the theological sceptics, that secular history is important to the Christian and that Christianity always suffers when its historical character is minimized, because the immediate result is always a loss of ethical vigor among Christians. I think I see a fine traditional ambiguity in the word ‘vocation’ as the call of God both to religious commitment and to service in a job. I see no reason why I cannot find a reconciliation between my two

'vocations' on the practical working level of teaching and writing history, if not on the loftier levels of philosophy and theology."

VII

To the professional historian, much of what has been discussed thus far may seem highly theoretical and only very tenuously related to the practical work-a-day problems of the classroom. It is my conviction, however, that in any discussion of religious perspectives in teaching history—whatever may be true of other subjects—it is impossible to separate the theoretical and the practical, just as it is impossible to split apart the historian's dual function as teacher and writer. The real problem is to find a practical working form of Augustine's or Luther's understanding of history which takes account of the immense recent progress of historical knowledge and technique, which conforms to the idiom of twentieth-century thought in general, but which remains true to the basic insights of Christianity into the nature of man, of God, and of time.

On this level the first illusion to be got rid of is the idea which I have heard expressed by enthusiastic theologians that being a Christian will make a man a better professional historian—nay, that it is the very condition of being a true historian at all, since it was Christianity which nurtured the modern historical sense of unique events happening in irreversible sequence in straight-line time. Christian belief is obviously no substitute for competent scholarship at the technical level, and it would be intolerable pride in a Christian to suggest that on this level his religion gives him an advantage over the non-religious historians. I cannot see how Christian belief contributes anything significant to the careful study of matters like the laws of Solon, medieval land-tenure, or the impact of gunpowder on the history of military tactics. Furthermore, sectarian prejudice has long been a notorious obstacle in the path of historical understanding.

There is an important truth, however, at the basis of this illusion, a truth most eloquently developed in Herbert Butterfield's penetrating and exciting recent lectures on *Christianity and History*. It is that the Christian understanding of the nature and destiny of man—created yet free, fallen yet redeemable, bounded by history yet able to transcend it by his imagination and creativity—cannot fail to deepen and enrich any historian's understanding of his subject. It

cannot be said too often that historical understanding is never merely a matter of reading documents. A child cannot comprehend Luther's experience in the monastery until his own human experience and powers of imagination are mature enough to provide at least some common ground of understanding. A student cannot understand the complexities of the movement Luther started, its contradictions and confusions, the mixture in it of lofty ideals and base motives, until he has absorbed something at least of how the politics and mass movements of his own day operate. In the same way, the truly great historian cannot afford to ignore the thinking about human nature and the problem of evil which has been done by the most sensitive and intelligent observers. To the Christian, the profoundest view is the Hebraic-Christian as it has been developed from the prophets and Christ through the apostles and later teachers of the church.

There is an opposite illusion which may also be dismissed briefly. This is that a man will be a better Christian for being a historian. Stated in this form, the proposition is of course absurd. Learning of any sort has never been a condition of Christian perfection. But again there is a truth at the basis of the illusion. The Christian faith was born among a people which had developed a relatively strong historical sense, and the New Testament is saturated with temporal terminology used naïvely: "then," "straightway," "when the time was fulfilled," "in the fullness of time." At the Last Judgment men are judged by what they have done in history, even though their righteousness or unrighteousness is not evident to them during their historical existence. The Apostles' Creed is a statement of belief about events which happened in time, not a statement of truths which are eternally true apart from time. To Augustine, as to the Hebrew prophets before him, there was significant development in time of God's purpose; and to Dante, the destiny of Rome was linked firmly and surely to the destiny of the Church.¹² In other words, the Hebraic-Christian tradition, unlike others which arose in India and China, is a history-valuing tradition; and it is no accident that when it became partially secularized, the result was the modern idea of progress. Except when Greek or Oriental influences have become dominant, Christians have never looked upon time as something to be fled or annihilated. There is a sense in which a man must be historically-minded in an elementary way in order to be a Christian.

Let us grant that Christian belief will not improve a historian's standing with his fellow scholars, nor professional historical knowledge a Christian's standing among the saints. On the practical level the gulf between Christian and historian is nevertheless by no means so wide as Ranke implied it was. There are some qualities and attitudes which are equally admired by Christians and by professional historians, and which may serve as guide-posts for the man who wishes he were both a better Christian and a better historian.

One of these is *universality* or catholicity of outlook. The best historians are not satisfied until by a rigorous intellectual asceticism they have risen as far as humanly possible above all parochialism of both time and place which narrows or distorts their historical vision. It was part of Ranke's greatness that he strove so hard and so self-consciously to rise above sectarian and national prejudice and to judge past ages by their own standards rather than by those of a later day. The most obvious source of this rationalistic universalism was the Stoic conception of the natural equality of all men and the eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism so akin to it. This outlook blended easily with the catholicity preached by a religion which insisted from the beginning upon the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all men. The monotheism of the Hebrew prophets and the belief in the universal fatherhood of the Christian God formed the basis upon which the first clear conception of the *unity of history* was built in the West. Christian historiography, with all its failings, constituted a notable step beyond the parochialism and nationalism of Greek and Roman historical writing; and even if it developed a new parochialism of its own, it never entirely lost the belief that all local histories are really one history. The Christian believed that though one nation may be "chosen," the mission of a chosen people is world-wide, more is demanded of it than of others, and if it falters, its mission may pass to the Gentiles. Amid all the welter of histories written in the interests of class, nation, race, or sect, this ideal of universality of perspective still stands as that of professional historian and Christian alike.

Closely related to universality is the difficult matter of *judgment*. The secular historian would dislike any theological terminology here, but a reading of the ablest contemporary historians I think would suggest that they believe in something very close to the Christian belief in a justice completed, though never annihilated, by mercy. Most historians are aware that they cannot avoid judgment

of men and movements, either in their writing or their teaching. Monographs and textbooks which simply "give the facts" betray underlying judgments in the very choice and arrangement of such facts—especially when they are read after the lapse of a generation or so. Students are quick to sense the judgment implicit not only in the conscious choice of material for presentation but even more in the unplanned and half-conscious tone of voice or facial expression which betrays the teacher. Granted the necessity of making judgments, the real question is on what basis they are to be made, and here the historian and the Christian are in general agreement. Justice requires that all the relevant data be used and fairly weighed before judgment is given. The usual result of a long and honest attempt to get at all the historical evidence about any disputed event or personality is an overwhelming sense of the complexity and relativity of the issues, a sense of *tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*. The desire to be fair ends often enough in the desire to extend mercy, even on the level of purely secular historical labor. In the Gospels "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees . . ." is balanced by "Judge not that ye be not judged." The historian knows—or should know—that the limits of judgment lie for him too between these same two extremes, between a sense of righteousness which refuses to blink the fact of evil, and a sense of mercy which follows from the complexity of human affairs and the frailty of human judgment.

To take a concrete case, any historian who writes, lectures, or talks with students about Luther is sooner or later forced to take up an attitude toward him. A Roman Catholic teacher may vent his righteous indignation upon the reformer; a pious Lutheran may make a spotless prophet of him; a Marxian may point out that Luther was a mere puppet in the grip of irresistible economic forces. It may be suggested, without any intent to blaspheme, that the best professional historian's ideal here is theoretically the same as the Christian's: to see Luther as nearly as possible as his own Lord saw him, in all his weakness and strength, his compromises and triumphs, his freedom and his compulsion, so that in the resulting judgment justice is perfectly tempered with mercy. As a matter of fact, close and persistent study of Luther and his whole age by professional historians has brought us closer at least to the possibility of such a judgment than was conceivable a century ago, simply because we knew too little then. Mere knowledge is no guarantee of sound judgment of men and movements, either in historical study or in

ordinary Christian living, but it is often the beginning of true understanding. The kind of judgment the best historians strive for is not so far as some may think from the kind of judgment the truest followers of Christ have striven for.

A third quality or attitude which is characteristic of both historians and Christians on different levels is best described as *realism*. Generally it is the "humanists" among historians, not the traditional Christians, who are shocked by the realities of human nature as they are encountered in history. The historian and the social scientist habitually deal with human nature at its lowest level, the level at which "moral man" is absorbed in "immoral society." Much of the time they are concerned with the competition of groups for wealth and power, the game of power politics, the awful destruction of revolution and war. My guess is that the ratio of cynicism among historians is higher than that among, say, professors of literature or of physics. At any rate the historian is not apt to be a Pollyanna at the present moment of world history. Nor is the Christian. Both succumbed for a time to the eighteenth-century belief in the goodness of human nature and the inevitability of progress, but a good many non-Christian historians today would be impelled to agree with Herbert Butterfield when he writes, "We have gambled very highly on what was an over-optimistic view of the character of man. . . . It is essential not to have faith in human nature. Such faith is a comparatively recent heresy and a very disastrous one."¹³ The tough-mindedness about which many professional historians pride themselves is not so far from a Christian attitude toward human nature as a soft and idealistic optimism.

Tough-mindedness must be balanced, however, both with the historian and the Christian, by *open-mindedness*. By this I mean openness to unforeseen possibilities in human nature and history. The historian who is merely cynical is obviously going to be blind to the unexpected and unexplainable good in human nature, the movements which turn out better than their sordid origins would lead one to expect. "Good" events in history have a disconcerting way of producing unlovely results. But many of the results which we later call "good" have been the by-product of selfish conflicts—civil liberties in English history, for instance, were partly the product of self-interested squabbles over privilege by social or religious groups. The great historians have invariably had a certain open-mindedness to the infinite possibilities in human nature which is certainly akin

to, though it is not identical with, the Christian's sensitivity to the redemptive possibilities in any human situation. In the mental make-up of a historian, realism must be balanced by a certain naïveté and wonder, a sense of the kindness in human beings that is the ultimate foundation of societies and of the resilience which human beings keep demonstrating in the face of disaster and evil. On a different level the Christian would call this kindness and resilience evidence of the workings of grace. Luther's warning that to talk of the Law and forget the Gospel is "to wound and not to bind up, to smite and not to heal, to lead down into Hell and not to bring back again," has its clear implications for the historian as well as for the Christian.

Finally there is a sense in which both historians and Christians are *relativists*. One of the major counts brought against teachers of history by moralists in our day is that they instill into the minds of our youth a corrosive relativism, a feeling that there are no universal and unchanging standards and that moral codes are always relative to time and place. In this view, for instance, there is no justification for saying that Democracy is any better than Naziism, or "civilization" any better than "barbarism." Undoubtedly there are radical sceptics among historians (as we have already pointed out) who appear to enjoy fostering the amoral relativism they find ready-made among their students. But the Protestant Christian at least will find some common ground more readily with one of these relativists than he will with an absolutist who deifies some historical institution or movement or individual. The Christian is too deeply rooted in history to be unconcerned about the strivings and achievements of his own class, nation, or civilization in history. But his nature and destiny can never be understood from the historical perspective alone since man transcends history in addition to being immersed in it. In other words, the prospect of the collapse of our civilization is important (as it is not to a Buddhist), but not all-important (as it is to a humanistic believer in progress). If God is really Lord of history, then no man or group or idea is lord of it. The Christian can never compromise with men who see the meaning of history exhausted, for instance, in the rise of the Aryan race to world empire under the leadership of a Fuehrer; but he can find a beginning of mutual understanding with men who refuse to diefy any hero or cause in history.

In all this there is meant to be no implication that the attitudes of

professional historians and of Christians are *necessarily* the same, or even that when parallel attitudes emerge they spring from the same underlying motives. It is simply to say that from the perspective of the mid-twentieth century, Ranke was wrong. There is no inherent and necessary contradiction between being a Christian believer and being a professional historian.

VIII

We are left with a final question. Is there anything *distinctive* about a historian who is also a Christian? What are his marks and how will he be known? How will he understand history and how will he attempt to teach others to understand it?

To many—students, colleagues, and friends—the chief test will be quantitative: the amount of time and attention a historian devotes in his writing and teaching to the place of religion in history. Important as this test undoubtedly is, I believe it is generally over-emphasized. A good historian, whether he is a person of religious belief or not, should give religion its due just as he gives every other factor—economic, political, intellectual—its due in his study of the historical process. The current tendency is to ignore or minimize the role of religion in history as the story gets closer to the present. It is no particular surprise to most historians to learn that while the average college text in European history devotes about 30% of its space to religious developments in the middle ages, only 2% or less of its space is taken up with specifically religious movements after about 1800.¹⁴ There is no question that a glib unexamined assumption that “religion is through” is often behind this progressive neglect of religious factors as the textbook writers skim over the modern centuries. In any truly impartial search (if such were possible) for what made the nineteenth century tick, religion would bulk much larger than it does in most of our texts. But this is a matter for historians in general to settle with their scholarly consciences. Naturally a historian of Christian leanings will be interested in the religious factors in history and he will probably give them due space. But being human, he will be in constant danger of giving them *too much* space, of “dragging religion in,” like the Marxian who distorts the historical picture by overweighting the economic factors. The plain fact is that specifically religious ideas, religious images, religious institutions, and religious influences in general were nowhere near so dominant in the Europe of 1800 as

they were in the Europe of 1300, and any historian who blurs this fundamental fact is not being honest. There is no simple quantitative test of a Christian historian. His mark is not the quantity of time he devotes to religious matters, but the quality of his whole treatment of his subject.

To follow out the example chosen, how will a Protestant Christian historian view the "secularization" of European society since the middle ages? How will his view differ, if at all, from the average textbook and classroom treatment? In terms of time and space devoted to religious movements it may differ very little, and yet I fancy there should be a profundity to it which is generally lacking in the ordinary treatment. "Secularization" is an extremely complex and subtle sort of historical process. In many ways people in the middle ages were as worldly and immoral as people in our own day, and considerably more brutal and insensitive in some respects. True, the Church dominated their daily existence, their whole culture became infused with Christian ideals, and there was no real alternative to Christianity as a system of ultimate truth. But when we ask whether the hold of Christianity upon their lives was more or less "totalitarian" than the hold of Naziism upon Germans under Hitler or of Marxism upon Russians under Stalin, the answer is that the hold was probably less total. Naziism and Communism are not religions, but they appeal to the religious emotions of men, they organize themselves along lines strikingly similar to the Medieval Church, and they make demands upon their followers that are best described as religious. If we grant that they are pseudo-religions, it could even be argued that we live in a more "religious" age than the middle ages. Christianity itself is more widely spread over the earth's surface than ever before, and even the economic and political philosophies of our day have to be given a "religious" dynamic in order to move great masses of men. This suggests that "religion", often in a bewildering variety of perverted and idolatrous forms, is still one of the major forces in the twentieth-century world, as it was in the thirteenth. This is an exaggeration, of course, but it may serve to suggest dimensions of the problem of "secularization" which generally remain unseen by "secular" historians and which should be evident to those of Christian belief. The latter should be aware that the concept of secularization is only one of many—and a crude and clumsy one at that—which historians need to describe the historical change which has taken place since 1300. The Western

world has become more "worldly" since Dante's day, but to anyone who knows the history of the "Dark Ages," the present battle of the Christian churches with "worldliness" is surely nothing new. The "secularization of society" is a far more subtle affair than it appears to be in most textbooks.

The Christian who is also a historian, then, will be known neither by any fully-rounded "philosophy of history" which is the necessary outcome of his Christian belief, nor by the amount of time he spends talking or writing about Christianity. He will be known by *his attitude toward history*, the quality of his concern about it, the sense of reverence and responsibility with which he approaches his subject. This attitude will of course be determined by the quality of his Christian faith and life. The intensity and character of Christian belief varies enormously. An indifferent Roman Catholic will differ a great deal in his attitude toward history from a recent convert, and a Calvinist will see things differently from a Quaker. But I believe it possible to sketch the characteristics of a sort of composite Christian historian, provided the reader remembers that the author of the sketch is a Protestant, and provided both remember that although it is given to all men to follow Christ in any profession, it is given to none to become like his Master.

The attitude of the Christian historian toward the past will be like that of the Christian toward his contemporary fellow beings. He may seldom mention the name of God, of Christ, or of the church, but in every remark he makes in the classroom and in every paragraph he writes in his study there will be a certain reverence and respect for his material, a certain feeling for human tragedy and human triumph in history which is closely parallel to the Christian's respect for human personality in general. He will try to understand before he condemns, and he will condemn with a sense that he too, being human, is involved in any judgment he may make. He will not bleach the moral color out of history by steeping it in corrosive scepticism. Nor on the other hand will he use history as a storehouse from which deceptively simple moral lessons may be drawn at random. He will admire Lord Acton's unquenchable moral fervor in urging historians "to suffer no man and no cause to escape the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong", but he will not be impressed either by Acton's historical wisdom or by his Christian humility in this famous passage. He will have too lively a sense of his responsibility to his students,

his community, and his society, too deep a sense of the urgency and crisis of his time, to dismiss the whole story of the past as a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing. He will know that to see any meaning at all in history is an act of faith, not a result of studying documents, but he will not dodge the question for that reason. He will be aware that every man in his beliefs belongs to *some* school or party or church, and he will not be afraid to admit that his own beliefs have their source in a church. He will say that he thinks them to be far better beliefs than those which stem, for instance, from the school of scepticism or the Communist party.

At the same time he will remember that he is a teacher, not a preacher or a pastor; a layman rather than a clergyman. He will remember that as a layman and a historian he has no more right to pontificate about the ultimate meaning of history than his students or his friends. If he is a Protestant, he will not grant this right to any human being, whether priest or lay. Where materialists may see mere blind process, where rationalists may see evident progress, he will see providence—a divine *providing* in both the conscious decisions and the unintended results of history, a purpose partly revealed and partly concealed, a destiny which is religious in the deepest meaning of the word, in which human freedom and divine guidance complete each other in some mysterious way.

He will not blink the fact of evil in history. He will not be so naïve as to relegate it to a past which is progressively being left behind, or to an “environment” which can be changed merely by a little human goodwill, or to some convenient historical scapegoat such as a “bad” nation, an “inferior” race, or a “degenerate” class. But he will not leave his hearers or readers to wallow in masochistic enjoyment of history’s folly and brutality. He will be sensitive to the unpredictable and sometimes unbelievable redemptive forces in history. He will not “know it all.” He will neither sell his fellow human beings short, nor will he overrate them. Behind both the personal decisions and the vast impersonal forces of history he will see an inscrutable purpose. He will look for the working of God both in the whirlwinds and in the still small voices of history. He will give a sense of pondering and wondering more than of either dogmatizing or doubting. “. . . And if God’s motives are hid, are they therefore unjust?”

There is a sense in which the Christian historian is justified by faith. No man can *know* the meaning of history, but his faith that

there is meaning in history may perhaps be counted to him as knowledge in the same sense that faith is counted to the Protestant believer as righteousness. The Christian historian's faith may nourish, enrich, and deepen the faith of those about him for the very reason that it is *not* knowledge. Let us insist upon it again that it is *an attitude toward history* which is neither assurance nor doubt—*an understanding of history* which is something less than a philosophy but more than a mere frame of mind—it is these that are the marks of a Christian historian. In the last analysis, the attitude a Christian takes toward the history of which he himself is a living part will determine his attitude toward the history which is past.

This will not be enough to some—to an Orthodox Jew, for instance, to a Roman Catholic, or to a fundamentalist Protestant. To many others it will be too much. A professing Christian member of the historical profession will be constantly aware that he is fighting a two-front war, against non-Christians who think he believes too much and super-Christians who think he believes not enough. From the subjective point of view this consciousness that there is no wall for him to put his back to may be the ultimate mark of his calling. Deep within him will be the faith, counted to him perhaps as righteousness, that in spite of the conviction of Ranke with which we began, a man may be "first of all a Christian *and* a historian."

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NOTES

1. Lord Acton, *A Lecture on the Study of History* (London and New York, 1895), p. 50 and note p. 115. Acton quotes an article of Victor Cherbuliez in *Revue des deux mondes*, Vol. XCVII (1872), p. 537, in which the historian is not identified.
2. James Westfall Thompson, *A History of Historical Writing*, Vol. II, p. 171.
3. *American Historical Review*, Vol. LIV (Jan. 1949), p. 261.
4. *Can We Know the Pattern of the Past?* Discussion between P. Geyl . . . and A. J. Toynbee . . . (Bussum, Holland, 1948), p. 30.
5. See the "Suggestions for Further Reading" at the close of this essay.
6. Augustine, *De Civ. Dei*, Book XII, chap. 13. The passage from Origen (*Peri Archon*, II, chap. 3) is quoted by Lynn White, Jr., "Christian Myth and Christian History," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, III (1942), p. 147.
7. *De Civ. Dei*, V, chap. 21.
8. Luther, *Werke* (Weimar ed.), Vol. XV, p. 32.
9. See Oscar Cullman, *Christus und die Zeit*, (Zürich, 1946) (French trans., *Christ et le temps*, Neuchâtel, 1947), particularly Part I, Chap. VIII.
10. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1949), pp. 190-197. Italics mine.
11. P. G. Lindhardt, of the University of Aarhus, Denmark, at the conference at Bossey mentioned above.
12. The most significant passages for study of the general problem seem to me the following: Acts II, III, X, XI; Romans VI; Galatians IV; I Corinthians XV. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, Book V, Chap. 21; Book XII, Chap. 13; Book XVIII, Chap. 46. Dante, *De Monarchia*, and *Purgatorio*, cantos 16, 20.
13. Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London, 1949), pp. 34, 47.
14. *College Reading and Religion: A Survey of College Reading Materials sponsored by The Edward W. Hazen Foundation . . .* (Yale University Press, 1948), pp. 209-211.



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